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The Story of Jack.

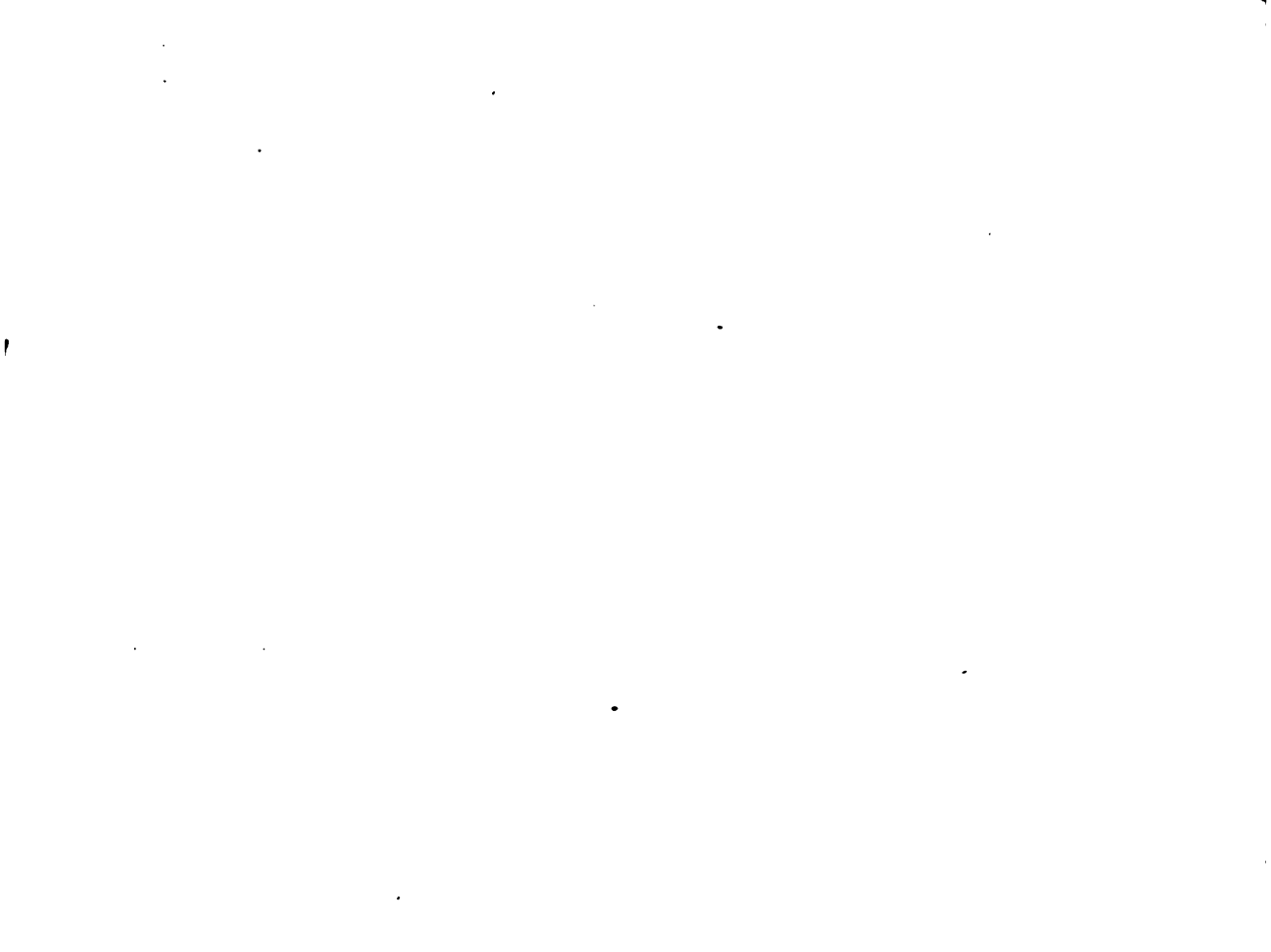
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FROM

Harold E. Perry





THE HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT.

THE STORY OF JACK

THE

The Hermit of the White Mountains

BY

JAMES E. MITCHELL

1891

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THE STORY OF JACK.

GOOD morning, Captain, you are here, I see ;
Well, take a seat till I just think a bit.
I was foolish yesterday to agree
To tell my yarn, — I seldom speak of it, —
For forty year I've tried hard to forget,
But some things burn into a fellow's brain,
And even now, in moments of regret,
I seem to live my whole life o'er again.

But seeing you are no newspaper man,
And won't go printing what I have to say,
I'll spin my yarn as truly as I can,
I said I would when you called yesterday.
You see me here, a hermit old and gray
And bearing hard on three-score years and ten,
Like others you have wondered, I daresay,
What brought me here, away from haunts of men.

Aye, sir! these summer days when travelers come
And laugh and joke here in my humble ship,
And ask me why I made this place my home,
'Tis but the dregs, another bitter sip, —
Beg pardon, though, I'm steering wild, I guess,
So now I'll start upon the other tack;
I may sheer off a few points more or less,
But save your patience and I'll steer right back.

My parents died when I was twelve years old,
In London I was left without a friend,
My whole possessions were one pound in gold
And hopes that Fate would something better send.
I scorned the institutions that were free,
And feared that I might yet be sent to school ;
My whole ambition was to go to sea,
I went, — and there is where I played the fool.

Barefooted, with my bundle I would trot
For days and days around the London docks ;
“ Do you want a boy, sir ? ” And all I got
For answer was hard words and harder knocks.
At last one day when hope was almost dead,
And tired and homesick I sat down to cry,
A little girl came toddling up, and said :
“ Don’t cry, poor boy, you ’s lost and so is I.”

And so she was, the bonny little dear ;
Her eyes were blue, her hair like shining gold.
She 'd " Come to look for daddy's ship down here,"
Her name was Mary, and just five years old,
That's all she knew, — I thought her heart would break,
She cried for mamma, and was hungry, too ;
I changed my last sixpence and bought a cake,
And soothed and petted the best I could do.

So hand in hand we wandered up the street,
She ate her cake and I forgot my care ;
The day was hot, the pavement scorched my feet,
I guess we looked a sad and homesick pair.
At every corner we would make a stop ;
At last an omnibus came rattling by,
Two jolly sailors perched upon the top,
My little mate jumped up and gave a cry :

“ Oh, there 's my daddy ; daddy, here is me ! ”

She started off and like a deer she ran ;
The men were talking and they did not see,
But I thought quick and soon I formed my plan ;
I caught the baby, pushed her through a door
And cautioned her to stay and not to stir,
Then ran as I had never ran before,
To catch and bring her daddy back to her.

I caught the 'bus and climbed up, nothing loath,
And blurted out, “ Your little girl is gone.”
I said this, looking squarely at them both,
You see I did not know which was the one,
I soon found out, for one turned deathly pale ;
“ Avast, my lad,” he cried, “ What 's that you said ? ’
I knew my man and quickly told my tale,
Then off we ran to find the little maid.

But, Captain, you are getting tired, I know,
"T aint interesting to you, I can see;
But though it happened fifty years ago,
It seems but like the other day to me.
But let us have a drop of home-made beer,
"T wont hurt you, sir, perhaps 't will do you good,
It 's made of hops and roots that grow round here,
And mighty good to help digest your food.

'There, now I've wet my whistle, I'll go on,
Just help yourself, I'll get more by and by;
You see when all the talking's done by one,
He's very apt to get a little dry.
Let's see, where was I? Yes, we found our prize,
And how they kissed and hugged and kissed again,
I could n't help the tears that filled my eyes;
You see I felt a sort o' lonesome then.

Then little Mary told how I had cried,
 “ Because,” said she, “ he lost his daddy, too.”
And then I told my yarn and how I tried
 To go to sea, or get some work to do ;
“ Keep up your courage, little chap,” said he,
 “ Bill Simmonds aint the man to shirk a mate,
“ Just hoist your dullage, lad, and come with me,
 “ My wife and I can maybe put you straight.”

I need not tell you, sir, how well I fared,
 How I was petted by his pretty wife,
The very best they had with me they shared ;
 These were the sweetest days of all my life,
But joys and sorrows, too, must have an end,
 For Bill must soon be pushing off to sea,
And then to prove how much he was my friend,
 On board his ship he got a birth for me.

I was to go on board as cabin boy,
I felt so proud I could not stay ashore,
And Bill's folks rigged me out, and in their joy
They called me "Admiral" and "Commodore."
And then the parting came, with tear and sigh,
For sailor folks, you see, have many cares ;
To hear Bill say, " God bless you, lass, good-by,"
Had more effect than forty parsons' prayers.

And so we sailed away to foreign lands, —
A jolly crew, though some were rather rude,
But I soon made good friends with all the hands,
And made myself as useful as I could.
To tell our ups and downs there is no need,
I sailed with Bill in different ships eight years,
His home was mine and we were friends indeed,
Came home with joy and left again with tears.

By this time I had grown to man's estate,
With A. B. — able seaman — to my name,
And little Mary, too, had grown of late,—
The sweetest flower that e'er from heaven came.
We had been home a month, or maybe more,
It's strange how quick a pleasant time will slip,
But then it did not pay to stay on shore,
So we began to look out for a ship.

It was not many days before we found
As good a ship as ever went to sea,
The "Nelson," for the Indian ocean bound,
The dues were good and suited Bill and me,
But something seemed to say, "This ain't right, Jack,"
And little Mary and her mother, too,
Seemed anxious like, and tried to keep us back,
But then we laughed it off and joined the crew.

I've often wondered how it would have been
If Bill and I had listened to his wife,
But maybe He who rules has long foreseen
The changes wrought in every creature's life.
Well, sir, we parted, and it seemed to me
Our parting was more sad than usual then,
For sailor folks are used to this, you see,
And try to think of coming home again.

But all went well, and we got round the Cape
Well up past Madagascar t'ward Ceylon,
We bowled along in jolly good ship shape,
All glad to think how well the voyage had gone.
But all at once, one Sunday afternoon,
All hands were called to reef and take in sail,
'Twas quickly done, but not a wink too soon,
Then off we ran before the sudden gale.

And so we ran for hours, the gale increased,
The heavens seemed to drop down in the sea ;
The lightning flashed, the thunder never ceased,
The very Imps of Hades seemed all set free.
“ Hard, hard a-port ! ” a voice rang through the air,
“ For God’s sake hard a-port ! Land straight ahead ! ”
Too late — She won’t come round, and in despair
We struck before a single prayer was said.

What followed after that, I never knew,
For something sent me sprawling in the sea ;
When I came round, the sky was clear and blue,
And Bill stood high and dry on shore by me.
Thirteen were saved of all our gallant crew,
And fifteen bodies that were washed ashore
Was all we ever saw of forty-two
As gallant chaps as ever pulled an oar.

Ah! sir, I've very often wondered why

We few should have been spared to reach the land,
To starve for many weary months, then die.

But who dare criticise what God has planned?
Those who were able started to explore,

But soon returned, they had not far to go,
An island scarce a mile from shore to shore
Was their report. But they found water, though.

And so we made the best of what we had.

A cask of bread was washed up on the beach,
'Twas water-soaked, but still it was not bad.

We passed it round, an equal share to each,
Some mussels, crabs and limpets too we found ;

On these we lived for many weary weeks,
Our eyes bloodshot and bleared by gazing round,
And direful hunger blanched our hollow cheeks.

Disease and death came in amongst us then ;
We knew we could not save, what need to try,
What could we do, poor naked, starving men,
But wet their lips, or pray and let them die.
And so our number dwindled down to four
And then the rainy season came along,
Our sickness left us pale and weak and sore,
But still our courage and our hope was strong.

And when the tide was low, twice every day,
We travelled round that God-forsaken shore,
And all we found to eat was stowed away
And carried in to share among the four.
For nineteen weary months we lived like this,
But what we found to eat is hard to say ;
A snail or snake, for nothing came amiss,
We ate whatever came across our way.

Then Bill began to pine, and pale and fret,
We all could see that he was doomed to die.
At last, one night, I never shall forget,
He called me to his side to say "good-bye."
"I'm going lad," he said ; " my time is short,
" I've tried to stick it out as well 's I could,
" Don't worry, Jack, I 'm steering for that port
" Where sailors rest and honest dues are good.

" Your hand, my lad, just one more honest shake,
" For something tells me you will yet be free ;
" You 'll see to wife and Mary for my sake,
" And tell them lad, just how it was with me.
" I wish I might have seen them both once more,
" But 't aint no use. If all is true I 've read
" We 'll meet again upon that golden shore.
" Good-bye, my lad." And honest Bill was dead.

The best and truest friend I ever had.

We buried him next day down by the sea,
No wonder that the mourners looked so sad,

For now our number was reduced to three.

Upon his grave I put a pile of stones

And made a little cross to mark the spot,
But few could tell to-day among those bones
Which was the bravest man among the lot.

Then shortly after this, a week or so,

A storm came up, a reg'lar hurricane ;
It seemed to shake our island to and fro,
But in the morning all was calm again.

But what is that we see? A sail, a sail !

Here comes a boat, our signal has been seen.
We screamed and laughed, our faces deathly pale,
Our joy was worse to bear than grief had been.

We left our barren island with a will ;
God knows, indeed, we were not loath to go.
I ran and kissed the stones that covered Bill,
Perhaps 't was foolish, but I loved him so.
And so we sailed away to better fare ;
The crew were just as kind as kind could be,
God bless them all — Americans they were,
A finer crew, sir, never went to sea.

The Captain ordered how we should be fed,
And cautioned us to use the greatest care ;
But men are foolish, and soon one was dead,
He could not stand the over-bounteous fare.
So only two were landed at the Cape ;
We found a home-bound ship about to sail,
But my poor chum from death could not escape,
And I alone was left to tell the tale.

Arrived in London, I without delay
Must make report of what befell the ship.
The owners used me well and gave me pay
For all my time instead of for the trip.
And now with beating heart I must repair
To find Bill's folks, the folks I loved so well ;
I found the house, but they had gone from there
And where they were the neighbors could not tell.

Excuse me though — I'm getting dry again —
Your health, sir. There, I feel a better man.
Yes, thinking of it sometimes gives me pain ;
But now I'll wind up just as soon 's I can.
No need to tell you, sir, how days and days
I tramped through London streets and searched in vain.
How sometimes hope would lend her shining rays
And disappointment blot them out again.

Once at a corner, somewhere near the Strand,
I bought an apple while I stopped to rest ;
A kindly-faced old woman kept the stand,
And while we talked I told her of my quest.
“ Why bless you, sir, I knew them well,” she said.
“ Their man was lost at sea two years ago ;
“ Miss Simmonds, la ! Excuse me, though, she ’s dead,
“ The workhouse took the little girl, you know.”

How could I know ? But that was just her way —
Miss Simmonds too — I knew she meant Bill’s wife,
I made her name the workhouse, said “ good day,”
Then ran as if it were to save my life.
I found the place, my little darling too,
But cannot tell you sir, just how me met ;
I’ll skip that part, if all the same to you,
Don’t smile, ’taint often that my eyes are wet.

A half a dozen papers, maybe more,
We had to sign before we got away ;
I scarcely breathed 'till we got through the door,
And should have died if I had had to stay.
I boarded with a kindly-hearted dame
Who knew my story, and to her we went.
She made us kindly welcome when we came,
And then we talked till half the night was spent.

I told her all as simply as I could,
How Bill had died and all that he had said,
How we had starved with neither cloths nor food,
'Till one by one my comrades all were dead.
And then she told, while tears ran down her cheeks,
How she and mother had been sore distressed,
How they had fought with poverty for weeks,
'Till sickness came, and mother went to rest.

We changed the subject then, and plans were made
How she would go to school, and I to sea,
“Just for a year or two,” she blushing said,
I understood and did not urge my plea.
So that was settled and we kissed good-night,
I felt well paid for all I had gone through;
Hope for the future now looked clear and bright,
The storm was passed, the sky was clear and blue.

Next day we went to work, no time to lose,
We found a school and paid a twelve-months' board,
That settled Mary, then I took a cruise
Among the shipping, and a berth secured.
Again we parted, but our hopes were high,
My little Mary cried “God bless you Jack;”
I gently whispered, as we kissed good-bye,
“I'll bring your wedding dress when I come back.”

To tell you of our voyage would take too long;
We reached Calcutta, then we left the Bay,
Passed through the Straits, then up towards Hong Kong,
And thus a twelve month quickly passed away.
I sent a letter home from every port,
And sent a draft for school and other things,
And bought nick-nacks of every kind and sort —
Necklaces, laces, feathers, fans and rings.

I stowed them all away from prying eyes,
And when alone I'd laugh and toss my cap,
And picture to myself her glad surprise
When I would toss them all into her lap.
Our homeward trip was quick, the wind was fair,
And soon our ship arrived in Liverpool;
I thought, if Mary knew she would be there,
But then, how could she know there at the school.

And now the train for London I must take,
No stopping off for me for sailors fun,
But every little stop the train would make
It seemed as if I must get out and run.
They say "the longest story has an end,"
So I arrived and jumped into a fly,
Gave the address with half a crown to spend,
I knew the "tip" would make the driver spry.

We landed, stopped, and up the steps I flew;
My manners may be were not very good,
I never stopped to knock, but rushed right through
'Till in amongst a lot of girls I stood.
They must have thought me drunk, and well they might :
I scanned their pretty faces one by one,
But in that moment, sir, their came a blight
That crushed my heart and ruined every plan.

She was not there, but still somehow I stood,
No need to tell my name, they seemed to know ;
At last one said, as gently as she could :
 “ Miss Simmonds died, sir, just a month ago.”
I could not speak, my lips and throat were dry,
 But dazed like, tried in vain to reach the door,
My heart stood still, I gave one mournful cry,
 Then reeled and fell unconscious on the floor.

'Twas many days and weeks before I knew,
Nor did I care, how near to death I came,
In spite of this the doctor pulled me through ;
 Ah, well ! I did not thank them just the same.
And now I ought to end my story here,
 It's disconnected like, from then till now,
I sort o' lost my reck'ning for a year,
 I lived, of course, but could not tell you how.

And then I joined the navy, for I thought,
Perhaps, kind death will overtake me there,
But though in many skirmishes I fought,
It pleased the Lord my humble life to spare.
In Africa I've fought to free the slave,
And fearful sights among them I have seen ;
With Inglefield, among the frozen waves
In search of Franklin's frozen crew, I've been.

And after this, the Crimean War came on,
I fought through that on land and on the sea ;
Though thousands fell and died where I had gone,
Death did not seem to hanker after me.
And then there came a call for volunteers,
And I among the first, was glad to go
To India to fight the mutineers,
And all I got was but a scratch or so.

So I might say, " I've been in many wars,
In many bloody fights I've taken part ;
And though at times " I show my cuts and scars,"
The deepest scar of all is in my heart.
For many years I travelled land and sea,
I did not seem to care much where I went ;
The north or south was all the same to me,
Always on hand to go where I was sent.

The chest that held the presents that I bought
I locked and took it to a bonded store ;
It's there to-day, I could not bear the thought
Of opening it to look on them once more.
I left old England then for good and all,
And do not think I ever shall go back ;
I've waited long for death to sound my call,
But still I'm here. Your humble servant,
JACK.



